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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the opinions of Australian second- and third-year early childhood education students concerning the benefits of a collegial support program designed to assist professional development by improving the quality of practicum supervision. It was expected that as a result of improved supervision, students would experience increased learning about teaching, improved interpersonal relationships with peers and college staff, enhanced self-esteem, and increased social support. Fifty student teachers in both urban and rural centers were included in the program. Before and during their practicums, students were involved in a series of workshops, which were attended, on the average, by 10 students and 1 staff member. Students' views of the effectiveness of the program were elicited by questionnaires and interviews. Students also kept a reflective diary throughout the practicum. The following trends were apparent in the workshops: open communication skills, conflict management techniques, increased critical self-reflection, a common shared language, and support groups mechanisms. Favorable responses from students indicated that the program should be continued and possibly extended. (RH)

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ALTERNATIVE PRACTICUM SUPPORT SERVICES

DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER EDUCATION STUDENTS

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ALTERNATIVE PRACTICUM SUPPORT SERVICES

A B S T R A C T

This paper is concerned with the attempt by college supervisors to improve their supervision practices with early childhood teacher education students by moving beyond the diagnostic-evaluative role. Students were involved in a series of workshops, both before and during the practicum. Students' responses as to the effectiveness of the program were elicited by questionnaires and interview. Favourable responses indicate that the program should be continued and possibly extended.

ALTERNATIVE PRACTICUM SUPPORT SERVICES

Brisbane College of Advanced Education is a multi-vocational institution of higher education offering a range of tertiary courses. The students we are concerned with are student teachers who are enrolled in a major study in Early Education as part of their Diploma of Teaching.

In this course students are required to spend half of their practicum in the primary school with children aged from 5-12 years and half with pre-school children aged from 4-5 years. It is with the process of student teachers learning in the practicum with pre-school children that this paper is concerned.

All students experience a common program in their first year of study and all practicum experiences are in the primary school. In the second year, students studying Early Education experience their first practicum in a pre-school setting. Traditionally, support for student teachers comes from the classroom supervisor and also the college supervisor. Student teachers expressed a concern that this accepted level of support was not sufficient to enable them to maximize the practicum as a learning experience as the change from the highly structured primary school to the open philosophy of the pre-school presented a challenge that in many cases, appeared to be overwhelming. A tight monetary policy necessitates this pre-school practice being supervised by many college staff without an early education background and this appears to compound the transition problem for the Early Education students.

Machado & Meyer (1984:1) argue that in the practicum the student teacher is presented with a challenge which presents risks and unknowns, as well as providing opportunities for growth, insights, and also increased self-

awareness. However, if the risks and unknowns are too great, then growth could certainly be restricted. This was occurring according to some of our students.

One student, on behalf of a group of her fellow students, in a plea for additional specialist early education support from college staff, wrote:

> "the discrepancy which exists between the type and demands of the holistic planning which we are guided toward in early education, and the functional expectations of the teacher-in-charge, are enormous. If the role of the supervising lecturer is mainly one of support for the developing student teacher, and of liaison between the teacher-in-charge and the teacher-in-training, then inherent in this role is the familiarity with what student teachers are attempting to do.
>
> We acknowledge that this feeling of being unsupported can particularly apply to second year early education students who are carrying out their first block placement in a pre-school.
>
> The potential for learning for all student teachers on block placement is great. What I am reflecting is the growing sense of wasted potential felt by many early education students."

At this same time, the College had commissioned a report on Field Studies.

In his report "Field Studies: Cost Implications and Future Changes: A report prepared for the Brisbane College of Advanced Education", Price (1987:35) suggests ways of improving the supervision of college student teachers by college staff. He argues for the re-conceptualization of the role of the college supervision.

> "However, supervision must go well beyond accommodating current needs, and must look to broader issues of ongoing teacher development. To achieve this, the focus on supervision required is one which encourages self-sufficiency in student teachers so that as teachers they will have '... the capacity for autonomous functioning' (Eltis, 1984). This issue has been given considerable attention by educators recognizing the need for teachers to have skills to support their own continuing education (Eltis et al, 1983; McIntyre, 1983). Tinning (1984) argues for a re-conceptualization of supervision roles in the practicum so that supervisors are less concerned with a diagnostic-evaluative focus and more with assisting student teachers to develop skills of critical self-reflection so that they recognize the implications of their own practices."

The paper is a report of early education students' responses on the benefits gained from a collegial support program in which they were involved in an attempt to assist their professional development through improving the quality of supervision by college supervisors by moving beyond the diagnostic-evaluative role. We hypothesized that through improving our supervision our students would:

1. incur greater learning about teaching during the practicum;
2. develop more positive inter-personal relationships with their peers and college staff;
3. share in increased social support;
4. enhance self-esteem.

(Johnson & Johnson, 1987:9)

SUBJECTS

Fifty student teachers were involved in the program. These early childhood students were drawn from both second and third years of the Diploma of Teaching Course. They were undertaking their practicums in both urban and rural centres.

PROCESS

The program was undertaken in three phases in collegial support groups of about ten students with one staff member.

Phase 1:

Phase 1 was conducted at college prior to the practicum. Second and third year students were drawn together for a series of workshops. As college group learning is generally conducted within year co-horts this constituted a new approach to college group learning. As various skills are necessary for successful group participation in collegial support groups (Johnson &

Johnson, 1987:30), these workshops focussed on open communication and conflict management.

Phase 2:

In the second phase of the program an initial workshop was held during the practicum at a central location other than a practising school, to remove any suggestion of evaluation from the process. Students were also given verbal assurances that group sessions would have no bearing on final assessment for the practicum for individual students.

The workshop centred on the needs of students and offered support in open, non-threatening discussions. These collegial support groups focussed on:

- discussing ideas;
- addressing concerns;
- questioning planning strategies; and
- seeking clarification, guidance and support.

Phase 3:

The third phase of the program consisted of a second workshop held during the practicum. This sought to build on previous experiences and focussed on sharing concerns and needs with particular emphasis upon:

- planning;
- observation;
- record keeping;
- problem solving;
- teaching strategies;
- guidance; and
- reflections.

The topics of interest for this paper are concerned with the way in which the improvement of supervision by college supervisors moved beyond the diagnostic-evaluative role to one which fostered further the professional development of student teachers. This contributed to:

- greater learning about teaching;
- more positive inter-personal relationships with peers and college staff;
- increased social and professional support;
- enhanced self-esteem for students.

METHOD

All students were surveyed immediately following the practicum using both an open-ended and a structured questionnaire and a structured interview. Students also used a reflective diary throughout the practicum. All responses remained anonymous. Students were also surveyed regarding the continuation of the program and in the structured interviews were asked to determine the areas that were of most value to them.

In choosing a research methodology careful consideration was given to the nature of the problem being studied. This study was based on qualitative data, in the form of words rather than numbers.

As Smith (quoted in Miles & Huberman 1984,15) says:

> "Words, especially when they are organized into incidents or stories, have a concrete, vivid, meaningful flavour that often proves far more convincing to a reader than pages of numbers."

This view of qualitative analysis that we have taken is in line with Miles et al (1984, 21):

"The data concerned appears in words rather than numbers. They may have been collected in variety of ways (observation, interview, extracts from documents, video and tape recordings) and are usually processed somewhat before they are ready for use (via dictation, typing up, editing or transcription) but they remain words, usually organized into extended text."

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

All of the fifty students in the program completed the survey forms. Following a first reading in random order, the responses were sorted by two examiners according to whatever key ideas were either explicitly stated or clearly implied.

The topics (subjects, ideas) were then regrouped according to the four predetermined categories.

CATEGORY 1

Greater Learning About Teaching:

All students (100%) expressed the view that the collegial support groups had contributed to greater learning about teaching. While 66% of third year students felt that collegial support groups offered assistance in the area of observation and data collection, this rose to 80% for second year students. In the area of developing solutions to problems 92% of third years felt that the program offered support while this support was experienced by only 60% of the second year students.

Again, in the area of recall and analysis of teaching decisions, 92% of third year students but only 68% of second year students felt that the collegial support groups assisted in this area. Planning issues were of major concern to the second years (90%) while only 4% of third years found planning a concern.

The following are some comments:

> These are a vital part of professional development. The; no-threatening atmosphere greatly assists verbal communication and the ability to articulate professional matters.
>
> I feel it is very important as teachers to be able to discuss teaching practices, communication and conflict management to increase professionally.
>
> It helped to bring together a group who were going through the same experiences or rather, were in the same situation. The workshop provided, through conferencing, a number of solutions for a few problems, e.g. planning teaching decisions. I felt less stressed knowing that there were a number of us in the same boat.
>
> Gaining insights into the way others think and function. The self-initiated thought and action that was stimulated probably made this worth while because when I am teaching this opportunity will not exist in quite the same way. It helped me to further develop some inter-personal skills and solve problems.
>
> The withdrawal from the classroom gave me greater objectivity about classroom experiences.

CATEGORY 2

More positive inter-personal relationships with peers and college staff:

A greater number of second years (90%) than third year students (64%) commented on this area. The following is a sample of comments:

> The fact that I was able to hear other people's problems and discuss possible solutions, which may not necessarily have been my first choice, was most beneficial. An open mind is such an important attribute for any teacher to develop.
>
> It provided opportunity for second and third year students to mix and discuss problems and solutions.
>
> It was great talking through planning, etc. with third year students - the actual presence of third year students.
>
> I met many third year students I had never meet before and felt a teamwork approach.
>
> I got to communicate with my supervising lecturer on a personal basis, not only necessarily a professional basis, and I could sort my problems out with the help of others instead of battling through myself.

I came to appreciate my lecturer as a person - not only as a supervising lecturer.

CATEGORY 3

Increased Social and Professional Support:

Again, a greater number of second year students (80%) than third year students (68%) commented in this area:

I found that talking to other students helped to stop that "all alone" feeling.

Talking to third year students who have been through the practice before and can offer help and suggestions. Talking over problems with other people and lecturers.

Lets you know that everyone has the same problems as you! - and that they can be worked out!

It helps people who are experiencing difficulties to talk about their experiences and get feedback on these problems.

It enabled me to meet with other prac students and discuss problems from prac and as a result gain a variety of solutions.

It gave me a chance to discuss problems with other colleagues and look at other methods of teaching/planning and to expand my ideas.

CATEGORY 4

Enhanced Self-Esteem of Students:

In the area of self-esteem, 100% of third year students and 88% of second year students perceived their self-concept had been enhanced as a result of the collegial support program. This was exemplified by such comments as:

This lifted my confidence in what I was doing, i.e. planning. Plus receiving other ideas. I was able to see what I was doing was okay.

Any opportunity to get together with people with common interests/goals/situations, i.e. talk has to provide successful results. It provided me the opportunity to listen to and share with others.

CONTINUATION OF THE PROGRAM

100% of both second and third year students expressed a desire for the continuation of the program. Below are some of the supporting comments:

> Workshops offer support for those who need it from peers and people who understand early education.
>
> The fact that you could meet and discuss any problems from the practicum.
>
> Conflict management was good especially for my self-esteem and self-concept - as this was not being fulfilled at prac. Listening and sharing with other students.
>
> The extra confidence generated by contact with other students was beneficial. Understanding of many differing approaches to pre-school planning/teaching has come from those meetings.

One student presented a model for future sessions:

TOPICS MOST VALUED IN PROGRAM

Most Valued by Second Year Students	Most Valued by Third Year Students
Support Services/Systems	Professional Development and Self-Awareness
Planning	Problem Solving
Problem Solving	Support Services/Systems
Professional Development and Self-Awareness	Common Experiences
Common Experiences	Planning

DISCUSSION

The questionnaires and structured interviews were designed to evaluate what benefits were acquired by early education student teachers who were involved in the collegial support group program through college supervisors attempting to move beyond the customary diagnostic-evaluative role. In responding to the open ended questionnaire, all students were positive in evaluation of the program and wished for it to continue.

All students expressed the opinion that the collegial support group program had contributed to their gaining greater learning about teaching. When the topics about teaching were further categorized, it was evident that the second year students found that collegial support groups were of most benefit in the areas of observation, data collection and planning. These are essential skill areas for early education teachers as planning is often based upon observation and data collection. This change in emphasis to dynamic ongoing planning based on observation is very different from many of the primary schools where planning occurs before the practicum based on curriculum documents. These skills are related very closely to evaluation for second year students as all supervisors need to see written evidence of data collection and planning as part of the diagnostic-evaluative process. They are also essential skills for survival in child-centred programs for the second year student. These trends were supported by second year students rating planning second to support services as the topic most valued by them.

The third year students felt that assistance in observation and data collection had been gained from the program. This was to a lesser degree than with the second years. The greatest difference between second and third year students was in the third years lack of emphasis or planning concerns. Third year students confirmed this by rating planning last of

the areas most valued. This would seem to indicate that they felt that they were mastering the planning area and were prepared to move beyond the areas other than those set down for evaluation.

This is born out by their rating professional development and self-awareness as their most valued topic in the program. This is also supported by the extent to which they rated the recall and analysis of teaching decisions and developing solutions to problems. Third year students rated recall and analysis more highly than the second years. This appeared to indicate that more of the third years than the second years through their increased self-disclosure and reflection on their professional practice had been helped by the collegial support groups to move from a less secure dogmatic stage to a decision-making inventive stage (Diamond, 1988:133). This would also seem to indicate that for most of the third year students and for many of the second year students, we, as college supervisors, had been able to foster their professional development by going beyond the diagnostic-evaluative role to one where we were able to assist the student teachers in developing skills of critical self-reflection so that they were able to recognize the implication of their own practices.

In the area of more positive inter-personal relationships with peers and college staff, again more second years than third years felt they had benefitted in this area. However, some of the comments were favourable to having interactions with the college supervisors beyond those experienced in the diagnostic-evaluative process.

In the area of increased social and professional support, again more second years than third years gained benefit from the program. This was further supported by second year students when they rated support services as the

most valued topic while the third year students rated it the third most valuable.

In the area of self-esteem, all of the third years and almost all of the second years felt that their self-esteem had been enhanced through the program. This would seem to indicate that the third year students felt more in control of their own learning as indicated by their rating of professional development and self-awareness as the most valued area. Their comments also indicated that the support they were able to give to the second year students gave them increased professional satisfaction. It would appear that moving beyond the diagnostic-evaluative supervisory role assisted in fostering peer-group learning which assisted in enhancing the self-esteem of most students.

To summarize, through attempting to go beyond the normal diagnostic-evaluative role of the college supervisors by introducing a series of workshops run as collegial support groups involving student teachers before and throughout the practicum, the following trends were apparent:

- open communication skills;
- conflict management techniques;
- increased critical self-reflection;
- a common shared language;
- support groups mechanisms.

As the evidence suggests it is possible for college supervisors to move beyond their accepted diagnostic-evaluative role and in so doing benefit their students by fostering their critical reflective abilities through offering alternative support programs, it is intended to extend the support focus of the program further. This will entail placing a second year student with a third year student in the same placement. These students

would then work in a collegial support group consisting of a second year student, a third year student, a college supervisor and a co-operating teacher. In addition, the students would have access to the collegial support groups of the established program.

If the trends already identified continued, then it could be expected that early education teacher education students would have increased the potential of the practicum as a vehicle for increased professional development.

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